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SUBJECT: MAYOR OF ANDERAMBOUKANE DISCUSSES AQIM KIDNAPPINGS
AND PROMOTES HIS TRAVEL AGENCY

Classified By: Political Officer Aaron Sampson, Embassy Bamako,
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) On March 11 the Embassy met with Aroudeiny ag Hamatou, the Mayor of Anderamboukane, site of the Tuareg festival attended by four European tourists who were kidnapped on January 22 along the Mali-Niger border. As Anderamboukane's Mayor, Aroudeiny was responsible for the organization of the festival. Educated in France and a frequent international traveler - we met Aroudeiny as he was passing through Bamako on his way to France for a conference on conflict and stability - Aroudeiny does not fit the mold of a rural northern Malian mayor. In addition to his education and jet-setting, he also has an unusual pedigree as a senior member of the Tuareg Iwellemmeden group from the Menaka area. His elder brother, Bajan ag Hamato, holds the title of the Iwellemmeden's Amenokal, or traditional leader. Bajan is also Menaka's only National Assembly Deputy. Aroudeiny and Bajan's grandfather, Firoun, was one of the French military's fiercest Tuareg opponents during colonization.

2.(C) In contrast to Tuareg leaders from Kidal and Gao who have dispatched various private emissaries to ferret out information regarding the two Canadian diplomats kidnapped in Niger in December 2008 and the four European tourists taken in January 2009, Aroudeiny appeared relatively uninterested in the kidnapping details. When asked if the four Europeans were taken on the Malian or Nigerien side of the border, Aroudeiny first waived his hand and said: "What does it matter? The point is that they were captured." He then said he believed the four were taken at Bani Bangou in Niger. Aroudeiny claimed that he and other officials in Anderamboukane and Menaka tried to alert local camel herders and others to be on the look out for suspicious vehicles once news of the Europeans' disappearance reached him in Anderamboukane, but that there are so many suspicious vehicles in that corner of northern Mali that no one knew what to look for.

3.(C) Aroudeiny acknowledged rumors of potential Tuareg involvement in the actual kidnappings, and said this could adversely impact the image of Malian Tuaregs as providing evidence - in his opinion unfounded - of links between Tuareg bandits and AQIM. He rated the likelihood of more kidnappings of western hostages as high, and sketched out an historical progression of banditry in northern Mali that began with the smuggling of Marlboros, then cars, guns, drugs and now human beings. Aroudeiny said the only way to prevent future kidnappings was to ensure that no one paid for the release of those currently held captive by AQIM.

4.(C) Aroudeiny said he did not believe, however, that the increased threat of being kidnapped by bandits or violent Islamic extremists would adversely impact tourism to northern Mali. As if to emphasize this point he then plugged his private travel agency, Amawal Voyage, which runs trips across northern Mali and into southern Algeria, and asked if the

Embassy could help him identify potential clients in the United States.

5.(C) Comment: Our discussion with Aroudeiny was somewhat disappointing. Given his advanced education, status within the albeit small but still powerful Iwellemmeden Tuareg hierarchy, and role as the organizer of the ill-fated festival in Anderamboukane, we had hoped that he would provide a somewhat more detailed analysis of events in the north. What we got, instead, was a friendly shrug that said, basically: "stuff happens." His assessment of the elevated risk for future kidnappings, however, is worth noting and tracks with what we have heard from other contacts in Mali.

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